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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOL. XXX.

BALTIMORE, NOVEMBER, 1915.

No. 7.

EATING A CITATION

Some editors of Nashe and Greene have supported the theory of Greene's authorship of *George a Greene, the Pinner of Wakefield*, by pointing to the similarity between the incident (Act 1, Sc. 2) where George a Greene forces the insolent Mannering, who comes with a commission from the rebel Earl of Kendall for supplies for his army from the town of Wakefield, to eat the three wax seals of his commission and see the commission itself torn into shreds, and an incident which is supposed to have been true of Greene himself. The yarn is briefly told by Nashe, in a defense of Greene:

"Had he liu'd, Gabriel, and thou shouldst so unarteficially and odiously libeld against him as thou hast done, he would haue made thee an example of ignominy to all ages that are to come, and driuen thee to eate thy owne booke butterd, as I sawe him make an Apparriter once in a Tauern eate his Citation, waxe and all, very handsomely seru'd twixt two dishes."¹

This anecdote is taken not as the jest of a satirical writer, but rather seriously, by McKerrow, in a suggestion which he contributes for the "Notes on Publications" in the Malone Collections, Parts IV and V, 1911, pp. 289-90. As a possible explanation of the manuscript note on the title-page of the Duke of Devonshire's copy of the 1599 quarto of *George a Greene* to the effect that "Ed. Juby saith that y^e play was made by Ro. Greene," Mr. McKerrow proposes to construe the *by* as *for*, and hence, in this instance, virtually *about* Greene. After illustrating the usage, he goes on to say: "Robert Greene was a well-known figure in his day, and was undoubtedly much talked of after his death. Is it not possible that Juby fancied that the incident of George a Greene and Mannering in the play had been suggested by Robert Greene's treatment of the apparitor; and that the true meaning of the note is not that the play was written by Greene, but that

it was aimed at him or made use of incidents of his life?"

The incident occurs in several places. It is found in full in the prose romance on which *George a Greene* is based, the manuscript of which has been supposed to belong to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (the earliest extant printed copy being dated 1706). It is not known whether this prose version is later or earlier than the play, but it has been pretty generally assumed that the play is founded on the prose version in one form or another. The action is substantially the same in play and romance, the romance having an added touch of realism in Mannering's choking on the seals and being given a bowl of ale to wash them down, a detail which appears, doubled, in a similar incident in *Sir John Oldcastle* (1600).

The whole scene in *Sir John Oldcastle* (Act 2, Sc. 1) is on a larger scale. The Summoner here is a sort of stock character, whose traits, dramatically suggested by soliloquy and dialogue, carry with them a faint suggestion of the kind of wickedness so earnestly inveighed against in church councils in the Middle Ages, and so humorously hit off by Chaucer in the character of his summoner to ecclesiastical courts. One may imagine the "taking down" of such a character as furnishing great enjoyment to the audience even as late as the seventeenth century, the summoner being so generally unpopular.² The Sumner appears at Sir

¹ Special abuses of the office of summoner, or pur-suivant, of the ecclesiastical courts during the period 1580-96 may have led to the revival of good old stories about wicked summoners and also encouraged the summoned to acts of violence against the messengers. In the Acts of the Privy Council for 1580 (Eliz., Vol. iv, p. 820) there is a letter to the Lord Bishop of London "with a supplicacion enclosed complaining of the attaching and sending for by his seruantes (to the abuse of the Commission Ecclesiasticall) for poore men to their great charges and hinderance, nothing at their coming being laid unto their charg, but offered to be excused for a litle money." In spite of whatever action the Council may have taken, the abuse con-

¹ Strange Newes, 1592. C_v, McKerrow, I, 271, line 25.

John Oldcastle's place and attempts to serve a citation for him to appear at court before the Lord of Rochester. He is received by Harpoole, a member of Oldcastle's household, who

tinued. There are reprinted by the Historical MSS. Commission (Report 10, App. 2, p. 37) two letters to Bassingbourn Gawdy, of Norfolk, one under date of 28 June, 1593, from Sir Edward Stanhope and Dr. B. Swale, and one under date of 3 July, 1593, from the Archbishop of Canterbury, concerning the serving of a forged summons upon Gawdy by a "bad fellow," Thompson, the warrant being signed apparently by Drs. Cosin, Swale, and Drury. The Archbishop hopes that Gawdy "will yet further discover the knot of these cozeners . . . and disburden the poor people of such filthy cormorants." Matters had evidently reached a crisis by 1596, for at that date, according to Strype (*Annals*, Vol. iv, no. ccvii), there was published a "proclamation against sundry abuses practised by divers lewd and audacious persons falsely naming themselves messengers of her majesty's chamber; travelling from place to place, with writings counterfeited in form of warrants." Associated with these false messengers were those from the ecclesiastical courts. "Deceitful persons, falsely taking upon them to be messengers of her chamber; and for that purpose undutifully wearing boxes, or escutcheons of arms, as the messengers do; being associated with others of like bad disposition; have, and still do go up and down the country, with writings in form of warrants, whereunto the names of the lords and others of her majesty's privy council, and other ecclesiastical commissioners, are by them counterfeited." The abuse has continued, according to the proclamation, in spite of the pillorying and branding of offenders after prosecution in Star Chamber. Fees have been taken for the messengers' services; and, to cover up their trickery, these false messengers have compounded with those living at a distance from the courts "to dispense with them for a sum of money, and to make their appearance before the said lords." To correct the abuse, messengers are forbidden in future to receive their fees until those summoned appear with them in court; and all compounding for a sum of money forbidden, under heavy penalties.

The "knot of cozeners," the "filthy cormorants" which the Archbishop of Canterbury refers to so feelingly in the summer of 1593 give a contemporary significance to the treatment of the character of the summoner in *George a Greene*, which is noted by Henslowe as an "old" play in December of the same year.

I am indebted for the references to these three items to a foot-note in Usher's *The Rise and Fall of the High Commission* (pp. 62-3).

not only denies him audience, but beats him severely, and obliges him to eat the one wax seal, though it were "as broad as the lead that couers Rochester Church," exhorting him, "Be champing, be chawing, sir." Harpoole gives him a draught of beer, and then continues the punishment by requiring him to eat the parchment commission itself, washing it down with a cup of sack. A reminder of this closing incident occurs in *2 Henry IV*, II, ii, 148, where Poins, after reading Falstaff's letter to the Prince, says, "My Lord, I will steepe this Letter in Sack and make him eate it."

Mr. McKerrow, in his note on Nashe's anecdote,³ cites two allusions to similar scenes in real life. One is in Scott's *Abbot*, Note F, 'Abbot of Unreason,' where "a similar incident is described as taking place at the castle of Borthwick in 1547." The other is a case reported in Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials in Scotland*, II, 346.

The case in Pitcairn is in part 2 of volume I of the Edinburgh 1833 edition (p. 346), and it is dated February 3, 1595, though the root of the whole trouble goes back to December, 1594. James Hamilton and his wife, Agnes Cockburn, and their four sons were "denounced rebels" for not answering to a complaint of James, Lord Lindsay, David Dundas, and John Yallowleis, Messenger (at arms). Yallowleis had been sent with two companions to carry four letters, among them a citation for the Hamiltons to appear at court to answer for certain misdemeanors. Hamilton and his sons had been having a hilarious time in the country round about, slaying cows and oxen, breaking up mills, and driving the millers from their work. Lord Lindsay and Dundas appeared personally to pursue the Hamiltons before the King and the Council; but the defendants absented themselves (Dec. 19, 1594). The Messenger went to the *Place of the Peill*,

"and at the yett thairof, the said Agnes &c. cuming furth at the said yett, tuke the said messinger be the craig, struck him upone the heid, armes, and shoulderis, and gaif him mony bauch strikis with pistollettis; held bendit pistollettis to his breist, causit thame to sweir

³ *Works of Nashe*, IV, 163.

neur to use ony Letteris agains thame; and in end, with mony threatningis and minassingis, in ane verie barbarous and uncouth maner, forceit the said Messenger to eit and swallie the haille copyis of the saidis Letteris, and tuke the principall Letteris frome him; and thaireftir, shamefullie and cruellie dang the said Witnessis with bendit pistollettis and quinzearis, and left thame for deid: The lyke of quhilkis shamefull and presumptuous insolencies hes sendle bene hard of in the In-cuntrey."

The dates preclude the possibility of influence of this case upon the play *George a Greene*, as the play is noted in *Henslowe's Diary* as old 29 December, 1593. If there is any connection, this is a case of a popular play influencing history, rather than history influencing the play. It is not necessary, however, to assume that the Hamiltons got their notion of how to treat the unwelcome messenger from this or any other play.

As early as 1290 a similar incident occurred in real life. In the *Rolls of Parliament*, I, p. 24, col. 2, no. 15, is recorded a case brought against Bogo de Clare by Johannes le Waleys, clerk, who carried letters of citation from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the home of Bogo. He was received by members of Bogo's household, who beat and otherwise maltreated him, and compelled him to eat the letters and even the seals appended:

"Bogo de Clare attachiatus fuit ad respondend' Johanni le Waleys, Clerico, de hoc, quod cum idem Johannes, die Dominica in Festo Sance Trinitatis proximo perterito, in pace Domini Regis, et ex parte Archiepiscopi Cantuar' intrasset domum predicti Bogonis in Civitate London et ibidem detulisset quasdam Litteras de Citatione quadam facienda, quidam de Familia predicti Bogonis ipsum Johannem Litteras illas et etiam sigilla appensa, vi et contra voluntatem suam, manducare fecerunt, et ipsum ibidem imprisonaverunt, verberaverunt, et male tractaverunt, contra Pacem Domini Regis, et ad Dampnum ipsius Johannis viginti Libr' et etiam in contemptum Domini Regis mille Libr'. Et inde producit sectam" &c.

Bogo put up as defence the fact that the injury had been inflicted without his knowledge or his orders, by members of his household. The King regarded the offence as enormous

because of the contempt of church and throne; but Bogo was allowed to go on condition that he would appear later, bringing some suspected members of his household to answer for the crime. He came with all his household except these particular men, "qui incontinenti post praedictum factum recesserunt et abierunt." Bogo was then dismissed and Johannes le Waleys advised to pursue the principal agents.

On reading Note F to Scott's *Abbot*, I was first inclined to view the story with suspicion as a possible combination of a good old anecdote, about how to treat a summoner, with a stock character, the Abbot of Unreason, or lord of misrule. But it seems to be founded on fact. In his *Essay on Provincial Antiquities of Scotland*, under the heading "Borthwick Castle," Scott quotes in full the record of the case as it was extracted for him from the Consistory Register of St. Andrews by the Scottish antiquary, J. Riddell, Esq., Advocate. It is dated 16 May, 1547.

"HAY, DOMINUS BORTHWICK.

"Eodem die (die lunæ) Willielmus Langlandis baculus literarum cititarum Domini Officialis emanatarum super Johannem Dominum Borthwik ad instantiam Magistri Georgii Hay de Nynzeane et literarum excommunicandum pro nonnullis testibus contumacibus, juravitque quod Idem Willielmus baculus presentavit literas hujusmodi Curato dicte ecclesie pro earundem executione facienda die dominico decimo quinto die mensis instantis Maii ante initium summe misse. Qui Curatus easdem ante summam missam deponenti redeliberavit, et dixit, se velle easdem exequi post summam missam. Et supervenit quidem vulgariter nuncupatus ye Abbot of Unressone of Borthwick, cum suis complicitibus, and causit him passe wyt yam quhill he come to ye mylne-dam, at ye south syde of ye castell, and compellit him to lope in ye wattir, and quhan he had loppin in ye wattir, ye said Abbot of Unressone, saide ye deponent was not weite aneuche nor deip aneuche, and wyt yat keist him doune in ye watter by ye shulderis. And yerefter ye deponent past agane to ye kirk, and deliverit yaim to ye curate for executione of ye samyn. And you, ye said Abbot of Unressone, came, and tuke ye letters furt of ye Curate's hand, and gaif ye deponent ane glasse full of wyne, and raif ye letters, and mulit ye samyn amangis ye wyne, and causit ye deponent drynk ye wyne

ande eit ye letters, and saide, gif ony maa lettres came yair, salang as he war lord, yai sulde gang ye said gait: propterea iudex decrevit Curatum citandum ad deponendum super nomine et cognomine dicti Abbatis de Unresone et suorum Complicium et literas in futurum exequendas in vicinioribus ecclesiis. Et dictus Abbas et complices excommunicandus quam primo constare poterit de eorundem nominibus."⁴

The details of this situation are so dissimilar to those of *George a Greene* that it is quite unnecessary to assume any relationship between the historical case and the play; for there is nothing in the incident narrated that accounts for anything lacking in the prose romance of *George a Greene*. There are a few details in which the situation at Borthwick castle resembles that in *Sir John Oldcastle*. A summoner is sent from an ecclesiastical court bearing unwelcome letters of an official nature. He is forced to eat the letters steeped in wine. The whole affair of the Abbot of Unreason, the setting of the church service, the ducking in the mill-dam—these are all irrelevant to our purpose. The only distinctive feature of the story that reappears in *Oldcastle* and is not sufficiently accounted for otherwise is the use of the wine.

Mr. J. R. MacArthur seems to feel that this item needs accounting for. In his dissertation on The First Part of *Sir John Oldcastle* he discusses the relation of the Oldcastle incident to that of *George a Greene*. He notes the close parallelism between the play and the prose romance of *George a Greene* up to the point where the pindar forces Mannering to swallow the seals.

"Here the scene in the play closes. In the romance the treatment of the unfortunate messenger is somewhat more humane, for *George a Greene*, seeing the Sumner almost choked, sends for a cup of sack, which the poor wretch drinks. This proves that, although the authors of *Sir John Oldcastle* may have known *Greene's* play, of which an edition was published in 1599, they could not have derived from it this incident, which seems to have existed elsewhere. There was, moreover, a ballad on the subject of the Pindar of Wakefield, a

few lines of which are quoted in the two plays of 'The Downfall' and 'The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon.' We shall see a little later that Munday, one of the authors of *Sir John Oldcastle*, was concerned in the composition of these plays. Hence it is probable that some version of the story was accessible to the writers of *Oldcastle* other than that given in *Greene's* play. From the latter they could not have derived the last incident of the story, the drinking of the ale."⁵

Of course, if the prose version of *George a Greene* were accessible to the authors of *Oldcastle*, the use of the wine might be traced to that as a source. Or, perhaps some may choose to suppose a familiarity on the part of the playwrights with the 1547 case at Borthwick Castle. That the wine figured in an early version of *George a Greene* and was omitted purposely from the play is not inconceivable. It would not indicate less humanity in the treatment of the messenger so much as it would indicate a greater dignity, as well as brevity, in the handling of the scene. In the play of *George a Greene*, the action moves very rapidly at this point, with a minimum of talk between the pindar and the messenger, and a minimum of stage business. The choking over the seals and washing them down with wine (it will be remembered that in neither version of *George a Greene* is the letter eaten) would have exaggerated the farcical nature of the incident beyond the apparent intentions of the author. In spite of the essentially comic character of the incident, we get the impression of a certain strength and dignity of character in the hero. In *Oldcastle*, on the other hand, the comic features are expanded till the result is broad farce. The situation is visualized by the playwrights down to the slightest detail. To a writer who is dallying with the situation, expanding it with much talk, prolonging the agony of mastication and of swallowing, what more natural than to hit upon the idea of washing down the choking stuff with wine,—and then, of multiplying the incident by two? The wine may be traced to two possible sources, provided we assume a sufficiently early date for the prose

⁵ University of Chicago, Scott, Foresman & Co., 1907, p. 49.

⁴ Cadell, Edinburgh, edition of 1834, p. 205.

romance underlying *George a Greene*; but is it, after all, really necessary to assume that the authors of *Oldcastle* were incapable of inventing this bit of business? It seems to me entirely possible that several writers handling this situation might invent this independently, because it occurs so naturally the moment one begins to visualize the process of chewing wax seals and parchment and trying to swallow them. It is only a question of how many sources it is desirable to assume for the treatment in *Sir John Oldcastle*.

George a Greene is practically rejected as a source of *Oldcastle* by R. S. Forsythe who says, in commenting on Schelling's derivation, that "a careful comparison of the three scenes in question will show only the germ of both the later ones in that in *George a Greene*, while there is, on the other hand, a close correspondence between that in *Henry V* and that in *Oldcastle*." Mr. Forsythe draws up an extremely careful parallel between the *Oldcastle* incident and that in *Henry V*, Act V, Sc. 1, to which one cannot do justice without quotation:

"Fluellen and Gower enter, the former with a leek in his hat; and in response to a question from Gower he says that he will force Pistol to eat it. Pistol enters swaggering, and is accosted by Fluellen. The latter comes to the point and bids Pistol eat the leek. He refuses contemptuously. Then Fluellen beats him and continues at short intervals to do so, all the time discoursing upon the virtues of the leek until it, and even its skin, is eaten. Then Fluellen gives Pistol a groat to mend his broken pate, while Gower reproves him for his previous actions. In *Oldcastle* a summoner (corresponding to Pistol) enters before Lord Cobham's (Sir John Oldcastle's) house, with a process from the Bishop of Rochester's Court to serve upon Oldcastle. Harpoole, the faithful servant of Oldcastle, appears and learns the summoner's business. He examines the parchment which the officer has, and then comes to his point—the forcing of its bearer to eat it. The officer, who is, at his entrance, quite assured in bearing, attempts to brave it out. Harpoole beats him, however, until, protesting very vigorously—as does Pistol,—he eats the summons. While he does so, Harpoole ironically praises its wholesomeness. As Fluellen makes Pistol eat the skin of the leek, so does Harpoole force the summoner to eat the waxen seal on the parchment. After the docu-

ment has been disposed of, Harpoole calls the butler and orders a pot of beer for the summoner, with which to wash down his lunch. The beer having been drunk, the officer is dismissed, Harpoole in the meantime giving him certain directions concerning his future conduct."⁶

Mr. Forsythe is evidently assuming the stage performance of a version similar to that of the Folio of *Henry V* to have been the source of the scene in *Sir John Oldcastle*. It were a pity to attempt to mar the exquisite symmetry of the parallel by attacking it in any one part. Fortunately that is not necessary. For the average person's common sense will rebound to the conclusion that, while the situations requiring the sending of the message are by no means identical in *George a Greene* and *Sir John Oldcastle*, they are much more similar to each other than is either to that in *Henry V*; for the serving of a disagreeable official message is considerably more like itself than it is like the serving of even the most fragrant leek upon an unwilling man; for eating purposes three wax seals are rather more like one wax seal than they are like an onion skin; and the destruction of a commission, whether by tearing it to pieces only or by eating it, has no essential similarity to the heroic demolition of an onion. How natural it is to close such a scene as that in *Oldcastle* with good advice to top off the maltreatment may be seen by referring to the incident at Borthwick Castle, 1547, and the Scotch law case in Pitcairn (1594-5). One needs no special source for so natural a detail as this.

Confronted with a choice between *George a Greene* and *Henry V* as sources for *Sir John Oldcastle*, one would without hesitation accept *George a Greene*. But it is very clear that the general framework of *Sir John Oldcastle* is not at all accounted for by that of *George a Greene*, romance or play. A very substantial resemblance will be found between the earliest historical case that I have found, that of Bogo de Clare in 1290, and the treatment in *Sir John Oldcastle*. In both the messenger sent is a summoner from an ecclesiastical court, who carries

⁶ *Mod. Lang. Notes*, 26, 104-7.

an unwelcome citation to a lord of a household. The summoner is received by one or more members of the lord's household, and, with a beating in one case and threats of a beating in the other, is forced to eat not only the letters but the seals. These are the only two versions here discussed in which both letter and seals are swallowed. There is still another respect in which these versions correspond and in which they differ from the others. There is a sequel to the incident. Bogo de Clare later answers at the King's Court for the offense, but is allowed to go free because the defense pleads that not Bogo himself, but a member of the household, without his master's knowledge or consent, committed the offense. Similarly there is a later scene in *Sir John Oldcastle* (Act II, Sc. iii) where the hero appears before the King's court to answer for his conduct. Here the King takes Oldcastle's part and not the Bishop's, and assists him in establishing the defense that, as he was absent when the offense occurred, he is not responsible for the actions of the members of his household. Like Bogo, Oldcastle goes free on the ground that suit must be brought against the principal agent, and the lord is not responsible for his servant's actions if they are without his knowledge.

I should not care to insist that the Rolls of Parliament were inspected by the authors of *Sir John Oldcastle*, and that the law case here cited was the direct source of the two scenes in *Sir John Oldcastle*. But it is worth while noting that there is a substantial similarity in narrative detail. Forcing a messenger to eat unwelcome letters seems to have been a favorite diversion in England and Scotland for several centuries, judging from the number of allusions that survive. A slight resemblance to the situation may be found in another case in Scotland, noted in *Bannatyne's Journal*, p. 243. In the reign of Mary, one of the Queen's pursuivants, sent out to proclaim everything null which had been done against her in her imprisonment, was forced to eat his letters, was beaten, and warned not to come that way again.⁷ We have, in addition to this inexactly

dated occurrence, three law cases, 1290, 1547, 1594-5; the prose romance of *George a Greene*, of uncertain date but probably existent before 1593; the play of the same name, played as old, 29 Dec. 1593, and the play of *Sir John Oldcastle*, first performed in 1599. In view of the evident popularity of the custom of forcing a messenger to eat unwelcome letters, whether in real life or on the stage, need we attach any weight to Nashe's little anecdote about Greene's treatment of the apparitor in the tavern? The personal anecdote was as popular in the times of Elizabeth and James as it is to-day. The jest-books show the habit of attaching good old stories to new characters that they seem to fit. How universal such a habit is will be understood by anyone who ever undertook to collect the stories told as true of any public man who got a real hold upon the popular imagination—say Abraham Lincoln, for example. Greene was certainly one type of man that could be expected to accrete anecdotes; and in the incident there is some artistic fitness to the popular conception of Greene's conduct. Greene may, of course, have done exactly the thing attributed to him by Nashe; but in view of the historical incidents above related, it seems entirely possible that Nashe's little anecdote was but a jesting allusion to what he expected every reader to recognize as a well-known good old story. Certainly we should be cautious about concluding that Greene wrote *George a Greene* because of a parallel between the facts of the play and the facts of Greene's own life, or even that Juby fancied that the play was written either by or about Greene merely for this reason.⁸

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⁸ Brief notes on "Eating of Seals" (most of which are indexed under "Oldcastle") were contributed to *Notes and Queries*, 1893-8. The most important are those by Edward Peacock, 8th S. iii, 124 and 9th S. i, 305, in one of which he raises the query whether the compulsory seal-eating ever occurred or whether the anecdotes he reprints from various sources are to be regarded only as jests.

⁷ See Scott's *Essay on Border Antiquities*, p. 71, note.